

VZCZCXYZ0015
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DE RUEHDS #0027/01 0080807
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 080807Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9012
INFO RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA 2040
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 8837
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 3292
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 3022
RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA 4090
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2956
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 7146
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RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL//CCJ2/CCJ5/CCJS//
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS ADDIS ABABA 000027

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NSC FOR PMARCHAN

AIDAC
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: EAID PHUM SENV EAGR PGOV ET
REF: A) ADDIS ABABA 3611
SUBJECT: USG HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TEAM: SECURITY AND ACCESS
UPDATE #2

SUMMARY

¶1. Summary: Between December 27 and 30, the U.S. Government (USG) Humanitarian Assistance Team (HAT) in Ethiopia program officer, health and nutrition specialist, and safety and security officer traveled to Jijiga and Degehabur zones in Somali Region as part of an initial field visit to assess humanitarian conditions and examine security and access restrictions to inform future travel in the region. Despite improved access in parts of Somali Region in recent weeks, USG HAT staff report that a lack of clarity regarding clearance procedures and an apparent disconnect between regional, zonal, and district authorities and Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) continues to hinder movement. End summary.

ACCESS

¶2. As of December 30, USG HAT reported that travel in Degehabur District remains restricted to the main roads. U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the USG HAT have not been able to access rural areas. Despite approval from regional authorities for unrestricted access in Degehabur Zone, the USG HAT

observed that in practice secondary approval at the zonal and district level is required. In addition, USG HAT staff note an apparent disconnect between civilian and military authorities that effectively delays and hinders access.

¶3. In a December 27 meeting, the Somali Regional President provided verbal approval for unrestricted USG HAT access in Somali Region. Despite this approval, the USG HAT reported that secondary approval at the zonal level was also required. The Degehabur zonal administrator initially denied the USG HAT approval to travel to Deghamedo District, sighting security concerns. Subsequently, the zonal administrator stated that the USG HAT could travel to Degehamedo, but that he that could not provide security assurances. In this context, the U.N. Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) would not have provided security clearance for U.N. Children Fund's (UNICEF) staff traveling with the USG HAT, and the USG HAT ultimately did not attempt to travel to Degehamedo. In addition, in response to the USG HAT's request to travel to Gunagado village, the zonal administrator indicated that in the absence of village local officials, travel would not be possible.

¶4. In two separate meetings, the Degehabur zonal administrator informed the USG HAT that his approval was sufficient for access in Degehabur Zone and that military clearance was not required. However, Medecins Sans Frontieres/Greece (MSF/Greece) reported that it remains restricted to Degehabur town because it has not received military approval to access rural areas, despite verbal approval from the zonal and district administrators. In addition, the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) head of office in Degehabur reported that although WFP has access to all district capitals on the main road, with the exception of Degehamedo, as of December 28, WFP staff had not been able to meet with the military commander to discuss the issue of off-road travel. In addition, UNDSS curfew requirements for U.N. travel are contributing to reduced access. MSF/Greece and

WFP reported that despite repeated efforts to meet with local military commanders, the military has been unavailable. When the USG HAT raised these concerns with the zonal administrator, the administrator reiterated his authority for providing clearance, but stated that he would facilitate a meeting between WFP and the local military commander.

¶5. Despite approval from the Somali Regional President, ENDF forces repeatedly stopped and questioned the USG HAT. At Kebribeyah checkpoint, approximately 20 kilometers (km) southeast of Jijiga town, the ENDF detained the USG HAT before escorting the team to the ENDF commander to explain the purpose of the team's travel. Approximately 2 km further on at the south end of Kebribeyah, the ENDF forces again stopped and questioned the team. Similarly in Higelay village, ENDF forces stopped and aggressively questioned the USG HAT. Although, the ENDF permitted the team to continue after each checkpoint, the USG HAT noted that clearance from regional authorities did not appear to have been communicated to the field. USG HAT reported the pervasive presence of ENDF forces throughout areas accessed.

SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

¶6. In Jijiga town, UNDSS representatives reported increased tensions as a result of recent civilian shootings and the presence of police checkpoints at night. According to UNDSS, recent security incidents reflect increased tensions between Ethiopian highlanders and local populations. UNICEF and WFP strongly recommended the use of local drivers while traveling in Somali Region.

¶7. In Degahabur, WFP reported a security incident involving a young boy suspected of communicating with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) who was killed by the ENDF on December 29. However, USG HAT note that there have been no other security reports since mid-November. WFP opened a field office in mid-November in Degehabur town. USG HAT staff report that the WFP compound meets security standards and represents a secure potential base for USG HAT staff for future travel in the region.

¶8. USG HAT staff noted a reluctance of local populations and U.N. staff to discuss sensitive issues. Local U.N. and health facility

staff voiced concerns of potential civilian and military repercussions for communicating sensitive information.

CONCLUSION AND COMMENTS

¶ 8. In close coordination with the U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer, the USG HAT will continue to operate in Somali Region to facilitate the assessment of humanitarian conditions in the region and advocate for greater access for humanitarian agencies. The December 27 to 30 field visit has contributed to gaining the confidence of regional and local authorities and established a foundation for future travel. However, USG HAT note that a lack of clarity regarding access procedures persists, which continues to hinder access to conflict-affected areas in Somali Region. End

comment.

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